WHAT ABOUT HYPNOTISM?

BY THE

REV. H. G. HUGHES

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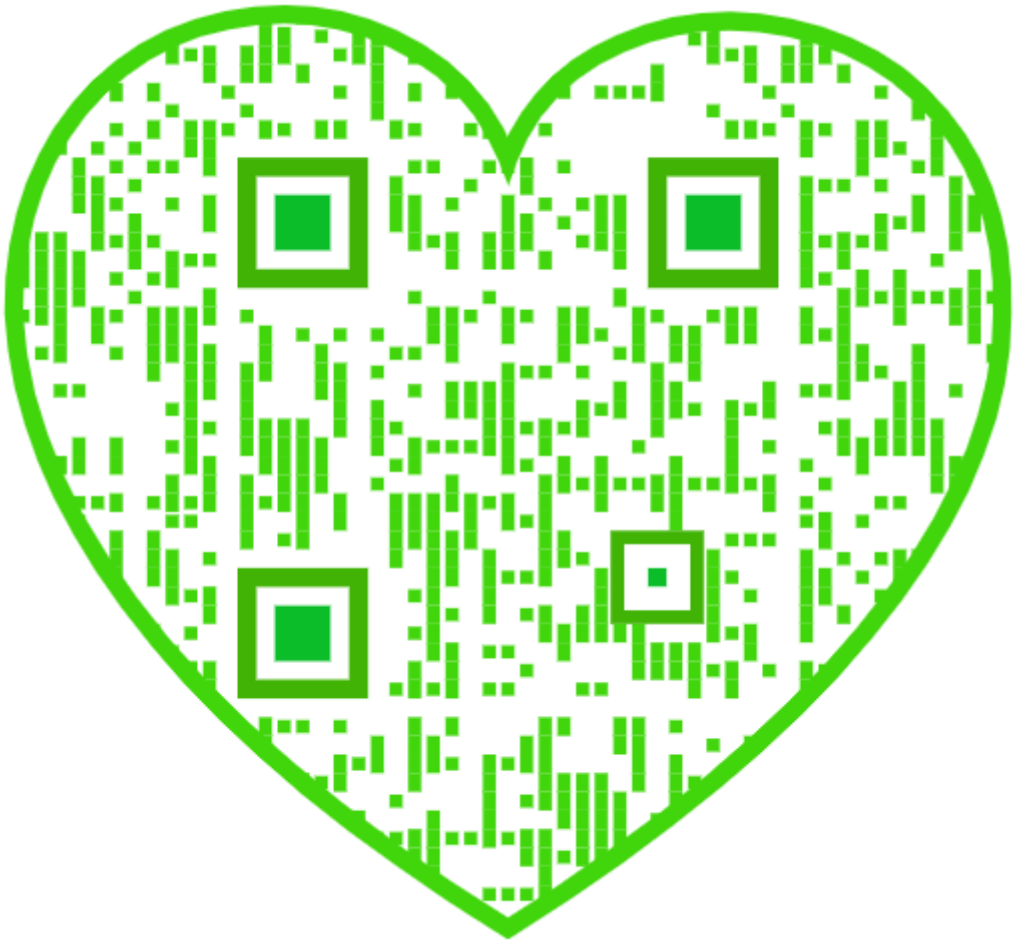

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WHAT ABOUT HYPNOTISM?

By the Rev. H. G. HUGHES[1]

I.

For many years past the remarkable effects that can be produced in the human subject by means of what is now generally called hypnotism have been attracting increasing attention. From their nature, these phenomena have aroused the interest of two very different classes of people. Their extraordinary and marvellous character appeals irresistibly to the curiosity of the masses, while their bearing upon the study of man's mental and bodily faculties has brought them under the serious notice of scientists. The advertisement sheets of our light periodicals are full of the praises of hypnotism as a means of amusement, influence over others, and gain; while its more enthusiastic advocates among scientific men declare that, in their hands, it has passed from the stage of charlatanism to the rank of an exact science. "Hypnotism," we are told by an eminent doctor who has made large use of it as a curative agent, "originated in mesmerism, as astronomy in astrology, and chemistry in alchemy;" and that therefore "among hypnotic phenomena are to be found those mesmeric ones which have stood the test of rigorous

[1] Reprinted from the *Ave Maria* with the Editor's permission.

'subjects' without parley; and in a few moments a majority of them are to be seen blindly following about a slight youth, who reminds us of the former operator in nothing except the force and fulness of his gaze; and who has apparently dominated them by that gaze alone, aided by a few passes from his quivering fingers. As they crowd on his heels, jostling over him and each other in the effort to gain his eye, they have all the air of Frankensteins which his magic has created, and of which he can now rid himself no more. At last, with a clap and a gesture, he restores them to comparative sanity. He then calls one of them forward, and bids him place his flat palm on his own; a rapid pass or two, and the victim, with all his contortions, can no longer remove his hand from the cohesion of the living magnet. Another 'subject' is then selected and thrown into a deeper condition of trance, in which he is told that he is to wake in a quarter of an hour, and then to perform in order a long series of actions of various sorts, such as putting his coat on inside out, stealing his neighbours' handkerchiefs, and so on."

There is much more to the same effect, but what I have quoted is enough to show how extremely unsavoury a business the whole thing is.

To come to the scientific aspect of these phenomena. The hypnotic trance—which may be induced by various means, and can even be brought on the subject by himself—is usually divided into catalepsy, lethargy, and somnambulism, according to its degree of intensity.[1] In the lighter trance, the subject is aware of what is going on, but is in a state of rapport with the operator, and susceptible to suggestions from him. In the deeper stages, the subject loses connection more and more with

[1] See Appendix on Hypnotism, in *Psychology*, by Father Maher, S.J.

all other objects but the hypnotizer and the particular experiences which the latter suggests. After the lighter trance, the subject can remember all that has happened ; while after being thrown into the deeper forms of hypnosis, all that has passed is a blank.

The chief phenomena observed are the following. The patient, on being told that he cannot move his arm or leg, or open his eyes, is completely paralyzed in regard to those acts. In a deeper stage, he may be told to stretch out his arm and that he will be unable to withdraw it. The arm will then become perfectly rigid, and can be held out for a far longer time than would be possible in the normal state. Any kind of illusion or hallucination may be easily suggested, and will be firmly believed in and acted upon by the patient ; and this, it is asserted by competent authorities, even though the actions suggested be absurd, unpleasant, or ridiculous. One great authority, Bernheim, states that crimes may easily be suggested and carried out through the medium of a subject in this condition. Dr. Milne Bramwell denies that this is so ; though the explanation he gives of an admitted instance of a subject putting sugar into a person's tea under the impression that it was arsenic, does not appear satisfactory.[1]

Other well-known phenomena consist in a remarkable exalted sensibility of the perceptive faculties. "In certain cases," writes Father Maher, "the sensibility of the perceptive faculties seems to be heightened in a marvellous manner, so as to enable the hypnotized subject to apprehend faint stimuli that would in the normal state be indiscernible. How far certain strange, extraordinary phenomena of this class are to be ascribed to hypnotism proper, it would be difficult to decide. At all events, authenticated cases of the kind do not seem

[1] *Encyclopædia Medica.*

to appear in legitimate clinical practice like that of Bernheim at Nancy. On the other hand, a writer as little likely to extend unduly the territory of the preternatural as Professor James is very frank in his confession of belief in the reality of occurrences at seances given by certain 'mediums' as altogether inexplicable by hitherto known natural causes."

Is, then, the practice of hypnotism right? In answering this question we must be guided primarily by our God-sent teacher, the Catholic Church, attending carefully to any decision she has pronounced upon the matter. Then we must look to the moral theologians who interpret and expound her utterances of questions of right and wrong, and who draw from them any conclusions to which they lead. If further instruction is required on any point, we must rely on the educated Catholic conscience, and decide the question to the best of our ability according to those great general principles of morality which we have imbibed from childhood. If we apply to these three sources of information, we shall find that the question, "Is hypnotism right or wrong?" cannot be answered by a simple "Yes" or "No." The Church is very careful not to condemn outright anything which is merely new or unaccustomed, or apparently marvellous. Nor will she condemn a thing which, though good in itself, is liable to abuse or has been abused. She will condemn the abuse and leave the good untouched.

In matters like this, the Church can afford to wait. At whatever stage of a new scientific practice or theory she may be called upon to pronounce a decision for the guidance of her children, she is always sure of finding, in the great deposit of dogmatic and moral truth committed to her, an answer that will be a secure and sufficient guide, for the time being, to the souls under

her care. As time goes on, and the true character of the theory or practice in question becomes better understood, both by theological and physical or mental scientists, she is able again, in the light of her unchanging and unchangeable principles, to give further guidance. Her gift of guiding and teaching is not a gift of prophecy or inspiration : the decisions which she gives are arrived at by the ordinary way of human inquiry and study—in the light, of course, of divine faith ; but these careful researches are so guided by the Holy Spirit who dwells within her, "leading her into all truth," that we may securely trust and follow her every word.

Thus, when first called upon to give guidance to Catholics on the question of hypnotism—or, as it was then termed, mesmerism, or magnetism—the Holy See (speaking through one of the Sacred Congregations to which the Chief Pastor delegates the consideration of many matters which do not call for the exercise of his supreme and inalienable prerogative of infallibility) laid down what we may call the first rule for Catholics in this matter. Coming as it does from the Holy See through its chosen representatives, whose decisions are ratified by the Sovereign Pontiff in person, such a pronouncement is of the most weighty authority.

At the time when this first decision was given, "Animal Magnetism," as it was then called, was not free from very grave suspicions of superstition. The astonishing feats alleged to be performed by magnetized or hypnotized persons were such as to be incapable of reference to any but a preternatural source. The Bishop of Lausanne, in an application which he forwarded to the Sacred Tribunal of the Penitentiary in 1841, states that magnetized persons, especially women, when thrown into the somnambulistic state, although

ignorant, and unskilled in medical science, when interrogated either orally or by a mere mental interrogation of the magnetizer, will give precise and accurate information concerning their own or others' diseases, even when those others are not present and are unknown to the somnambulist ; will indicate the seat and progress of the disease, with all its variations and complications, using the proper technical medical terms, prescribing simple and efficacious remedies.

In reply to the application of the Bishop of Lausanne, the Sacred Penitentiary, as we might expect, declared that "the use of magnetism, as set forth in the petition [*i.e.*, with these plainly superstitious attendant circumstances], is unlawful." In other words, the Sacred Congregation condemned all superstitious use of magnetism, though abstaining from a total condemnation of the practice in itself apart from superstitious uses. In 1856 the Congregation of the Holy Inquisition issued an instruction on this subject to the bishops of the Catholic world. "It has been found," the instruction states, "that a new kind of superstition has been introduced on occasion of magnetic phenomena, by many lovers of novelties ; not in order to throw light on physical sciences—which would be right—but to deceive and seduce men ; thinking that by the magnetic art . . . they can discover things hidden, distant, or future." After referring to a former decree on the subject, the letter proceeds : "Although the lawfulness and unlawfulness of the use and abuse of magnetism is sufficiently explained in this general decree (just referred to), the malice of men had so increased that, neglecting the lawful study of science, and following what is curious, they boast, with great damage to souls, of having found a means of fortune-telling and divination."

If effects like these were actually obtained—and, in the face of the evidence, it would be rash to deny that they were and are obtained—it would seem impossible to account for them by any natural known power. Even supposing the magnetizer to be fully acquainted with all the facts that he elicits from his subject, the performance is so far beyond anything ever accomplished by telepathy as to exclude referring them to the latter art ; which, moreover, in its "higher developments" is itself very questionable. Nor does it seem possible that any "exalted sensibility" could confer such powers. The conclusion forced upon us is, then, that if the facts are as they are alleged to be, there is so great a disproportion between the effects and any conceivable natural cause that they must be put down to preternatural—that is diabolical —agency ; and the practice of any art, whether it be called mesmerism, magnetism, or hypnotism, attended with such results, is plainly sinful.

In the decree referred to, which was promulgated in 1847, the Holy See had declared that "the use of magnetism—*i.e.*, the simple act of employing physical means not otherwise forbidden—is not morally wrong, so long as it is not for an illicit or evil object. But the application of purely physical principles and means to things or results which are in reality supernatural is nothing but a delusion and altogether unlawful and heretical."

The Holy See, then, has condemned all superstitious use of hypnotism ; all application of physical means that are otherwise unlawful or forbidden ; and all use of magnetism or hypnotism for unlawful ends or objects. Not only as a matter of obedience, but as a matter of reason, every Catholic will heartily subscribe to these prohibitions. None can doubt that

the great enemy of souls and his fallen angels go about the world "seeking whom they devour." As Dr. Johnson said, no one who reads the New Testament can disbelieve the fact that the fallen angels do exercise a malevolent influence over man. That they are intelligences of a far higher order than our own we know, and there is nothing improbable in supposing that they can and do take occasion from men's experimentizing with certain little-known forces, which in themselves are natural, to get into connection with human beings and to deceive and influence them by the introduction of their own diabolical operations into such experiments. The hypnotic or mesmeric state may sometimes offer them an occasion of this sort, like the planchette or the "medium" of spiritualistic seances. The terrible dangers of such communications, however brought about, cannot be exaggerated; and a recent work by a member of the Society for Psychical Research paints them in vivid colours, and incidentally reproaches that Society for not making clear, in their published Reports, the inevitable risks that, as they know from experience, research of this kind entails.[1]

But though, as Father Genicot points out, it is the abuse of hypnotism that has been condemned, not the practice itself with due precautions and restrictions, and with a lawful end in view, it would be a great mistake to suppose that the Holy See has given its unqualified approval to every form of the practice of hypnotism as it is now prevalent, or has given to Catholics complete liberty in the matter. Treating of the abstract question whether, apart from superstition, the practice is in itself immoral, the Holy See replies, as we have already seen, that "the

[1] *The Dangers of Spiritualism.*

simple act of employing physical means not otherwise forbidden is not morally unlawful." But there are many circumstances connected with the common practice of hypnotism as it now exists which may very well come under the head of "means otherwise forbidden," or of "unlawful ends and objects."

It is here that the work of the moral theologian comes in, who, investigating the matter, under the eye of the Church and in the light of the general principles of morality which she teaches, as well as of the decisions she has put forth, must pass judgement and say what are forbidden means, what are unlawful ends, what are the circumstances which may bring the practice of hypnotism into conflict with the teachings of morality. It is to them, then, that we must look for light upon many details connected with this practice upon which the Church has not spoken in particular; and in a concluding paper I propose to consider the question as treated by some of our eminent and recognized theologians, and according to the dictates of the Christian conscience.

II.

We have now to consider the teaching of moral theologians and of the Christian conscience in this matter. Let us take first the opinions of a well-known writer, Father Lehmkuhl, S.J. In our time, he tells us, many of the phenomena formerly attributed to magnetism are otherwise explained, or spoken of under the new name of hypnotism, which is a wonderful means of inducing a state of mind similar to (natural) somnambulism. This art is recommended as a safe means of producing insensibility under

surgical operations, and as a cure for diseases of the nerves and brain, rheumatism, and numerous other maladies.

On the supposition that these advantages are really to be gained, a theologian must ask, Is such a remedy lawful? We cannot deny, he replies, that it is lawful, unless (1) the mode of inducing hypnosis be unlawful, or (2) the effect itself be unlawful. Into the mode of inducing the state only two unlawful elements could enter—namely, interference with the rights of the subject or some superstitious practice. There is no interference with the rights of the patient, since (as it appears) he cannot be hypnotized without his consent.[1] As to superstition, that does not necessarily enter into the practice; for phenomena of a very extraordinary character may be brought about in a perfectly natural manner by modifications of the brain and nerves, and hallucinations the most stupendous may be produced by purely natural means.

"Is, then, the effect unlawful?" our author goes on to ask. We have, he says, the deprivation, for the time being, of the use of reason; such that the subject is entirely at the command of the operator. The effect is in itself a very serious matter; and it is a principle of the moral law that to deprive oneself of reason, which should be the lord and director of all our faculties, is not permissible except for grave reasons, such as the necessity of undergoing an

[1] Others say that, after frequently being hypnotized by the same operator, the subject can be instantly thrown into a trance, even unwillingly, and by the sight of a mere written command. An instance is also recorded of a patient falling suddenly into deep hypnosis at the distant sound of a gong which was customarily used to induce the state.

operation; and similarly, even graver reason must be adducible to justify that complete resignation of oneself into the hands of another which hypnosis, at least in its deeper stages, implies. Hence, Father Lehmkuhl concludes, there must be *some grave reason* for submitting to hypnosis, to make it morally permissible; and there must also be every precaution taken against possible abuse of his power on the part of the operator, so that he may have no opportunity of taking advantage of the helpless state of his subject to commit, or induce him to commit, any sort of crime. Of these precautions the most obvious, which will suggest themselves to all, would be, first, to take care that the operator is both *skilled* and of *unimpeachable* character; secondly, that the operation should be gone through in the presence of equally *reliable witnesses*, preferably relatives and friends of the subject; thirdly, it should be ascertained for certain that the constitutional disposition of the subject is not such as to make it likely that *permanent harm to the system* might ensue.

Every precaution being taken, our author concludes, the use of hypnotism will be lawful, especially if, as is alleged, diseases can be cured by this means which will not yield to any other kind of treatment. Scientific men of the medical profession claim to have established beyond a doubt the efficacy of hypnotic treatment as a curative agent, and that in cases which were otherwise incurable. He gives a list of cures, amounting to several hundreds, which he himself has seen effected; and it is a well-known fact that since the time when Braid, the English physician, devoted himself to the study of hypnotic suggestion as a means of curing disease, many other medical men of repute in their profession have used the art with success. There seems to be

no reason, therefore, to doubt its usefulness in this respect.

Hypnotism appears to be efficacious in the cure of drunkenness and drug habits, and also of defects of character. Nevertheless, as a writer in the *Month* for October, 1890, well says, "Save in the hands of duly qualified operators, and very few can attain that position, attempts at hypnotism are nothing short of criminal as necessarily involving a terrible disturbance of the whole nervous system—a disturbance which may extend to all the faculties." Rightly indeed do our moral writers require the most stringent precautions to be taken; and only when those precautions are taken do they allow the use of hypnotism.

Father Genicot, another recent writer of the Society of Jesus, allows the use of hypnotism upon the same terms as the theologian just quoted. He touches, however, upon another aspect of the question. He asks how far those who, being in the hypnotic state, or acting later upon suggestions received when in that state, carry out the commands of the hypnotizer, are responsible for their actions. Probably, he answers, the influence of hypnotism does not often extend so far as to deprive the subject altogether of moral liberty, so that he would commit any crime suggested to him. Nevertheless, it appears that sometimes the use of reason is totally suspended, in which case any evil action performed by the hypnotized person would not be a voluntary act; though that person might commit sin by willingly submitting himself, to begin with, to a condition in which he foresaw he would be liable to evil suggestions and their consequences. Doctors, he mentions, are still at variance as to the possibility of suggesting crime. Some writers assert that, though a hypnotized subject may be persuaded to do many

ridiculous and extraordinary and even unpleasant things, he will stop at anything opposed to his idea of moral rectitude. On the other hand, so high an authority as Bernheim, as we have seen, considers this kind of abuse quite possible. Most probably a great deal depends upon the moral character of the subject; and if this be so, a weak or dishonest subject might be made the easy tool of an unscrupulous operator.

According to the writer already quoted from the *Month*, the greatest risk is in the nature of hypnosis itself. "All its phenomena indicate its nature as a true nervous disease; and in several cases it has been shown to have, like hysteria, a tendency to spread, as if it were contagious." It is a two-edged sword, to be wielded only by one who knows perfectly how to use it without harm to those whom he wishes to benefit. But is it a fact that only skilled operators make use of this practice? Is it a fact that the stringent precautions necessary to avoid grave risk are always taken? We may take it for granted that medical men, whose reputation deservedly stands high, do take all precautions possible against physical, mental, and moral dangers. But what are we to say about public exhibitions of hypnotism, given by wholly irresponsible charlatans for the sake of making money? Here the Christian conscience may be securely appealed to.

Most decidedly such a thing is altogether wrong. It cannot be right that rational beings should put themselves entirely into the power of another for the sake of amusing a curious crowd with their ridiculous performances. It cannot be right that the delicate machinery of the nerves and brain should be rudely played upon by operators who have no knowledge of its intricacies, who are themselves unaware, perhaps, of the dangers attendant upon their art, and who are incapable of

repairing the harm they do. It cannot be right that private individuals should, at the invitation of money-making advertisers, learn and practise upon their friends and relatives so dangerous an art. As well might we, for the sake of amusement, administer potent drugs or intoxicating drinks to our brothers and sisters and friends in order to enjoy the degrading state into which they would be brought. Every Christian and humane instinct within us cries out, "No, this is not right!"

Would that English legislators might turn their attention to this crying evil of public exhibition and private practice of hypnotism, and, following the example of Belgium and other Continental states, make such irresponsible experimenting a penal offence! At any rate, let every Catholic determine that neither he nor his children, nor any one else over whom he has any authority, shall ever lend their countenance to so degrading a use of an art which is still far from being thoroughly understood, even by its scientific students. It may be of interest to quote once more from the writer in the *Month*:—

"If one might be permitted to conclude an article like this with a piece of practical advice, there would be a strong temptation to copy a famous admonition, and say to those about to hypnotize, 'Don't!' No sane person would dream of administering opium or aconite or any other potent drug for the mere purpose of satisfying an idle curiosity; much less would any one imbibe these drugs from such a motive. Yet at public exhibitions of mesmerism many persons have no scruple in submitting themselves for experiment without a thought of the possible injury which may accrue to them. To those about to get hypnotized we would still more emphatically say, 'Don't!'"

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